Policeman's

By Sean Piccoli
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When the notion takes her, Marie Tippit Thomas opens the boxes tucked away in her Dallas home and sorts through letters which poured in by the thousands after the death of her husband, Dallas Patrolman J.D. Tippit.

Officer Tippit was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald on Nov. 22, 1963, less than an hour after Oswald gunned down John F. Kennedy about three miles to the northeast.

Over the years, the slight Dallas woman disappeared from public view, refusing hundreds of interviews and devoting her time to rearing her family — at first by herself, then with the help of another Dallas policeman she married a few years later.

She chose the self-exile because she wanted to protect her children, she said last week in an exclusive interview with The Washington Times, her first in almost 24 years.

She reflected warmly about the tragedy's good aspects. Thousands of strangers responded immediately to the plight of a widow with three children. She said her life became a study in emotional extremes — highs and lows and "emotions pulling you in all kinds of different directions."

The public outpouring touched her heart and made her $650,000 richer. But in later years, she would struggle to rear her children and in 1982 would lose her second husband, Dallas Police Lt. Harry Dean Thomas, to cancer. The financial bonanza, unwisely handled by advisers, she said, slowly trickled away.

"I guess that at this time of year more than ever, you always relive these things," Mrs. Thomas said. "There were so many prayers ... from all over the country for our family, the cards that were sent, the contacts that were made and the money that was sent to our family from just all over ... the concern that was shown for a police widow and her three children, knowing she had bills to pay and the kids to raise.

"That thoughtfulness and concern makes you realize that the American people have a lot of care for each other. It's something [for which] I'll always be grateful."

Mrs. Thomas, 60, has a gracious manner and a vintage Texas twang. She talks less guardedly about her

widow breaks silence

past than her present.

"I still live in the same house I've been living in for the last 22 years," she said with a chuckle. "And I still go to church every Sunday."

Asked about her life, she said, "Well, I'm really doing real good. I've found all kinds of things to stay busy with."

She outlined church activities, grandmothering to six, meetings and seminars. Church always comes first. "There's always somebody at the hospital you need to go visit or something going through the church you have to do, and then there are courses over at the college.... So it's a matter of keeping everything going."

Because of the assassination's 25th anniversary, Mrs. Thomas often sees a newspaper article or a television program that mentions her late husband. Some of them upset her. A recent program questioned whether Oswald had shot her husband.

"Ridiculous," she said. "Well, that's what upset me.... There's all this speculation going around about how many people were involved in killing the president and this kind of thing — but they don't come back and tell you that there definitely were witnesses to Oswald killing J.D."

She curtly dismissed the suggestion that her husband knew Jack Ruby or Lee Harvey Oswald:

"To me that's something that somebody just made up," she snapped, "because there is no truth, no substance in that whatsoever.

"I think it's terrible that people would write something like that.... If they had done any investigation about J.D. Tippit, they would have known there was no reason to believe any such thing."

She describes Officer Tippit as a hard-working Christian. "I really was fortunate that I had 17 years of real happiness with him," she said. "And even though he was working an extra job, he still made time for the kids and myself.

"The night before he was killed... he and Sgt. [William] Anglin, who lived down the street from us, put brakes on our car. And that night he took care of the kids while I went to a PTA meeting. We were just an ordinary family — without the slightest thought that within hours of those activities, he would be gone."

Officer Tippit, an 11-year-veteran who patroled suburban Oak Cliff, stopped at home that Friday afternoon for a brief lunch, then returned to work. He never saw his family again.

About 1:15 p.m., he spotted a man who fit the radioed description of a suspect in the Kennedy shooting. According to witnesses, he sprung from his car near 10th and Patton streets in suburban Oak Cliff, and approached a man, later identified as Oswald by witnesses. As he was about to question or apprehend the suspect, he was fatally felled by four shots before he could pull his gun.

As Domingo Benavides, a mechanic who happened on the scene, ran to grab Officer Tippit's radio to report the shooting, he noted that Officer Tippit had pulled his gun only halfway from his holster. It was obvious, Mr. Benavides said, that Officer Tippit was dead.

Mrs. Thomas said she holds no harsh feelings toward Oswald. "This was just not a subject that we dwelled on," she said. "And nothing is going to bring J.D. back, so we have to go from there."

Mrs. Thomas focuses on the good things that came out of the death, such as changes in policy affecting families of slain officers.

"When J.D. died, his pay stopped, I think at 1:15 that afternoon, and [after receiving his last paycheck] I had to return the money that he would have gotten paid the rest of that day and the remainder of that period."

Incensed fellow officers later took up a collection to pay the amount she had to return to the city, she said, adding, "That was really touching." That department policy, she said, was later changed, which pleased her.

After Officer Tippet's death, letters and donations flooded in, including some from publishing czar Walter Annenberg, former "Tonight Show" host Jack Paar, Japanese schoolchildren, Texas prison inmates, Scout troops, churches and the Dallas Cowboys.

The largest single donation — $25,000 — came from Dallas businessman Abraham Zapruder, the citizen who shot the historic 8mm film of the last seconds of the president's life. Within six weeks — with local news organizations delivering boxes full of letters daily — more than 40,000 Americans had written and more than $650,000 had been donated to the Tippit survivors.

The money was placed in a trust at a local bank, where half went to Mrs. Thomas and half to the children. Always a frugal woman, Mrs. Thomas lived simply and shopped carefully, anxious to teach her children the value of money and hard work.

In 1964, she bought 500 circus tickets for widows and orphans of Dallas police officers.

Mrs. Thomas, never questioned about her worth over the years, is reluctant to discuss it even now. She said flatly that she is no millionaire.

"That [money] was put into a trust ... and I can't say that we've come out earning a lot of money with it," she said. "But anyways my feeling was ... that I wanted to make sure that the kids were taken care of."

Originally, she said, the children were each to receive about $110,000. For reasons she refused to discuss, she said, "They did not get that much money each at all."

She said she moved her money from the trust fund two years ago. She has worked hard, she said, to retain the principal, but politely declines to put a dollar figure on the amount today.

Son Curtis, 29 and married, works as a warehouse inventory supervisor. He lives near his mother in suburban Dallas and has two small children. Daughter Brenda is 35, single and works at a local video rental store. Charles Allen, 38, is married with four children. He works odd jobs and lives in the Dallas area.

Charles Allen Tippit's troubles following his father's death are known to Dallas police: a series of run-ins and arrests, a 1969 conviction at age 19 for assault.

"Allen had a very rough time. He was the oldest of the children, and, of course, very close to his dad," Mrs. Thomas said. "And all of that, the publicity, the trauma of losing a dad the way they did, that stays with you. It affects you, I think, all your life."

But she added, "I think they've turned out to be good kids, and I'm really proud of them. I think J.D. would be."

She extends fond wishes to another family stricken by tragedy: the Kennedys. She and her husband voted for John Kennedy in 1960 and the warmth in her voice is evident when she speaks of them.

"Bobby Kennedy called and Mrs. Kennedy remembered on national television ... that there was a police family ... [that] they were grieving. And you know, that really was wonderful."